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Architectural platform: a social network site for architects

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Abstract

Social network sites (SNSs) are becoming the platforms where socialization is practiced widely. The users of SNSs like Facebook and Twitter are increasing rapidly. Parallel to the increasing developments of social networking in the world, SNSs have started to appear and grow in different fields. The improvements of SNSs and widening of their fields of use have brought up the term “social media”. Social media is the dialogue and interaction of users with each other using Internet. Social media is formed by the collection of contents that are produced by users in a frame; social media is also the platform that the content is published. Social media uses social networks like Facebook, Myspace, Google Groups, Twitter and Friendfeed as tools.

In this paper, a SNS, *Architectural Platform (AP)* <http://www.mimariplatform.com>, for architects is presented. AP that consists of architectural catalogues, news, announcements, and sharing design ideas and user profiles in its content is developed. The design purpose of AP is to create a meeting point for the producers, architects, interior architects, academicians, students and other visitors who are interested in architecture. AP which is the first national SNS in its area in Turkey presents novel design and implementation ideas for a SNS targeted for architects. AP SNS which is active since February 2010 has reached 43.000 unique visitors as of June 2010.

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1. Introduction

Social network represents a structure in which the individuals are connected to each other with various relations. Although the connections in this structure are mostly based on friendship, they can be also about different subjects such as finance and trade. The three most basic characteristics of a social network site (SNS) are the abilities of the user to create a profile, to reveal the list of the people with whom the user is in contact and to access the contact lists of the others [1]. The main point which makes a SNS different than the other kinds of sites is to make it possible for the individuals to share their networks with other individuals who they don't know.

This paper presents a SNS, *Architectural Platform (AP)* <http://www.mimariplatform.com>, for architects. AP consists of architectural catalogues, news, announcements, and sharing design ideas and user profiles. AP is the first national SNS in its area in Turkey and presents novel ideas for a SNS targeted for architects.

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2. The development of social network sites

The development of SNSs in the world started with Sixdegrees.com in 1997. It enabled its users to create user profiles and friend lists, to search friends and send messages for the first time. Some programs such as ICQ [2] have also some of these features, but Sixdegrees became the first SNS which combined all these features. The various SNSs, which were built after 2001, have improved the concept of social network by using the innovations like the ability of music-file sharing and group forming. In 2002 Friendster [3] and LinkedIn [4], in 2003 Myspace [5] and finally Facebook [6], the most widely used one since 2004, came up as the most used SNSs. Today Facebook and Twitter [7] appear as the two of the most popular SNSs [8], [9]. Twitter has more than 106 million registered users; meanwhile over 400 million people worldwide actively use Facebook [8].

In 2002 Friendster was developed as a rival to the friendship (matchmaking, dating) sites like match.com. Friendster has become an alternative for those who want to contact the friends of their real life friends and create a social network, whereas many of the social networks were building systems in that period to make people contact to the others who they didn't know [10]. LinkedIn was developed as a site created to establish business networks and for its users to see the contacts of their own contacts. Contrary to the sites Facebook and Myspace, LinkedIn is the leading one of the SNSs which are being used in professional manner [11]. LinkedIn can be a model of a social network that would be improved in many ways, if it is wanted to establish a professional business network. In this site, it is not needed for being a member to be invited by another member of the site, users can reach the former colleagues, classmates and the colleagues from the present work life. They can generate new job opportunities for themselves by checking the job listings published on the site, can consult professional managers and experts of the professions among the members of the social network on professional subjects, can take their advice and can share information. In 2003, Myspace was established as a SNS in the interactive environment in which user communications and friendship could be provided and personal profiles, blogs, groups, pictures, music and video files could be shared. Myspace has brought an innovation by offering its users the personalization of their own pages through the different technical groundwork used. Facebook was developed as a SNS for university students in America in 2004 with a different kind of target audience. It was first only for Harvard students, but later included all the schools in USA in a short time. In 2006, Facebook was rearranged as a social network which was accessible for everyone with an age limit. In terms of its different technical groundwork, Facebook is one of the most successful Web 2.0 applications today. Ecademy [12] has created a structure which offers business and social network functions together. The site, established for the businessmen and the business world in 1998, still goes on growing today. Ecademy is a platform that provides for the members of the business world business related contacts by connecting them to the business networks, working on common projects with the other member networks, finding new jobs, personnel, providers, sponsors and job opportunities. It provides specific network groups (ecademy clubs), blogs, the activities that are going to be performed and announcements of professions.

Today the social networks have turned into a beneficial investment which can be used within the companies. However, today there is a common opinion that social networks in companies reduce the labor productivity. If SNSs can be used effectively for a purpose it can increase the productivity. Among the first examples of the SNSs, which were designed for the company use, are Yammer [4], which aims to be the company model of Twitter, and the social network service Chatter, which is being developed by salesforce.com. There are hundreds of SNSs with different features, and they are adding new innovations to their structures every day. The goals of SNSs basically are to generate online communities and to provide the creation of the interaction and the UCC (user-created content) shared among the members of these communities. We can broadly describe UCC as photos, videos, user profiles and user generated writings. Table 1 was formed by examining the main features of the most popular SNSs [13].

Table 1. Main features of social network sites

User profiles	UCC sharing
Create online connections	Opinion sharing feature
Join online groups	Access to information
Communicate with online connection lists	Keep users

3. Architectural platform: AP

The site AP [13] is an information and sharing network which was developed on a frame of purposes that aim to follow architectural developments, to create and manage up to date information databases about too fast changing architectural trends, to connect the visitors to the architecture offices, through its wide architectural database to be the first access point of the architectural information in the sector. The site AP aims to be a meeting point for the producers, architects, interior designers, academicians, students and the other visitors interested in architecture. The producers and architects can exhibit their products, the students and academicians can follow the architectural developments and use an infinite literature, and the visitors interested in architecture can easily access to all of the architecture news and e-catalogs from one point. The main page of AP is shown in Fig 1.

There are different kinds of services that AP provides for different user types. The possibilities have been offered for professionals to exchange their ideas on project solutions, to know new talents through the bulletin board and the display window, to follow the actual developments by following the national and international education, competition, fair, seminar, conference and workshop announcements. Moreover, the professional members, by adding contents to news, announcements and trend sections, find the possibility to present themselves to other colleagues and to the ones interested in decoration who visit the site over another site which includes different brands and products and which has been prepared by the experts in their fields.

For the students, the options have been offered to introduce themselves to the leading product providing companies of the sector, to the brands, to the architecture and interior designing offices by publishing their projects and to send internship and job applications to those companies and offices. The offered options for the academics are to exchange ideas with the colleagues who are parts of other national or international educational institutions in the sector and to follow the actual developments by following the national and international education, competition, fair, seminar, conference and workshop announcements. For all the other members, such as the ones interested in decoration or the ones wanting to decorate their houses or the ones who search furniture by walking the streets, such possibilities are offered to decide what to buy before shopping, to get information on the brand of the production which is going to be bought and to save time by reaching the product they want by finding the address on the map of the related providing company.



Fig. 1. The main page of AP

3.1. Main functions of AP

AP assembles the product catalogs, the information of companies, the news and the announcements about the sector under the main headlines “brands, companies, news, trends, display window and announcements”. There is an e-catalog system created within the site in the “products” section. The E-catalog has a turnable page structure with its originally printable catalog pages and brochures. It makes very practical to display the pages with the smart buttons (click and show) which can be added to these pages. The E-catalog was designed even for the most basic users to browse the pages just by clicking and to get access easily to the information or product they need. Through the e-catalog, visitors can find a wide variety of product catalogs in the architectural field.

In the “brands” section, based on the interests and needs of the users, the users can activate their requests to be informed about the products and the changes of the brands with the “follow” function. In the “companies” section, the users can have the contact information of the product providing companies of the brands. There is a map page designed in which the detailed location information can be accessed visually through Google Maps. The “news” section is a sectoral news division that its content is generated with architectural agenda. The “news” page includes the topics on the agenda compiled from local or foreign daily newspapers, magazines, online publications and the announcements of profession associations. The users can add and/or share comments after reading the news. The users can add news to the daily updated news section; however, the news added, just as all the other added contents, can only be published on the site after administrator’s approval. In the “trends” section, the users can follow the new trends and the artistic events throughout the world. In addition, among the objectives of this section is to create a platform by organizing conversations following the works of the architects and artists giving direction in their fields so that the artists can transfer their goals and visions to those who have interest. The “display” window section has been designed for the individual members to introduce their architectural projects. The members can exhibit the visualizations about their projects and the project details in this section and evaluate the comments on their projects. In the “announcements” section, members can access the up-to-date announcements about education and business opportunities; besides, they can post their own announcements and follow the feedbacks in this section.

3.2. Functions of AP as a social network site

There are different kinds of SNSs developed for many different kinds of purposes. The main common characteristics of these sites are to make their users be able to create profiles, to reveal the list of the people with whom the user is in contact and to access the contact lists of the others. Similarly, the user profile pages on AP have been created in a detailed way. The contents added by the AP members appear on the profile pages specially designed for the user. The contents created by the users can be commented by other users. The users can access the detailed information about a user by visiting the profile page of his/her page who creates contents of news or projects. The visitor, who wants to communicate with the user creating the content, through his/her profile page, can communicate directly with this user by using the e-mail system developed on the site. Besides, through the “report” function, the users can deliver the contents which they consider as harmful, directly to the site administration. AP members can create many different types of UCC such as picture, video and writings.

AP has a very flexible structure in terms of user-created contents. The members can produce news about architecture and interior designing, announcements, trends and projects. These contents can be added to the site in script, picture and video formats. All the contents created can be commented by the users. The freedom of the communication of the members has been increased through this feature. Private profile pages have been generated for every single member. The members can create detailed data on their profile pages about contact information, company information, interest fields, information of profession and educational information. AP has detailed search functions which have been designed especially for the members to provide quick access to the information. Through this feature, the members can access the information they search about architecture or interior design faster than every other page. AP currently does not have the functions to create online connections and friend lists. However, the profile pages generated for the users have been designed very flexible and detailed. The functions on AP can differ in terms of individual members and institutional members. Table 2 is listing that which of the main functions of AP can be used by AP members.

Table 2. AP member functions

Users	Fields of Use	AP Main Functions
Individual members	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6	1. Adding news 2. Adding announcements 3. Adding trend 4. Adding project 5. Following the brand 6. Saving catalog page (creating archive) 7. Adding product 8. Adding brand
Institutional members	7, 8, 9	9. Adding catalog

Social media [14] marketing is the presentation of a product or service, which is exhibited via Internet, by using social networks. Social media environments offer platforms which provide the target audience a direct communication with the company or the brand. AP has created pages on the sites Facebook and Twitter. The contents added to the AP site are also published on the social networks designated simultaneously in a day. For example, through the AP fan page created on Facebook, the communications can be established directly with the users. This is important in terms of collecting clear information on the kinds of contents which are being followed the most. AP has over 6500 active followers on Facebook. This number is the 40 percent of the daily traffic.

4. Conclusion

Currently the functions to create friend lists on AP have not been developed yet. However, all the profile pages were developed considering that this feature will be part of AP later on. In the near future, creating friend lists and instant messaging features will be added. The site AP works on a server system on which 200 users can connect at the same time. With addition of the other SNS functions to the system in the near future, we will improve the structure and performance of the server system. The detailed user traffic analyses of the AP site have been conducted since the site has started to operate. From February 2010 in the first 4 months, it has reached the number of 43,000 unique visitors. Since the starting date, the interior architectural products page has become the most visited AP page with 2500 visitors. 50 percent of the visitors have reached the site through the Google searches. In total, the 38 percent part has reached the site through Facebook page which is used by AP as social media.

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